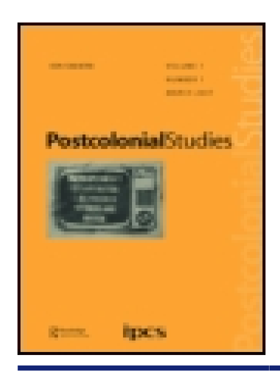




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A middle-class American in China was chatting with his Chinese tour guide. 'We have freedom of speech in America,' he said with Yankee pride. 'Anyone can stand in front of the White House and criticise President Reagan.' 'That's not a big deal,' replied the unimpressed Chinese. 'We have the same freedom, too, for anyone can stand in Tiananmen Square and criticise President Reagan!'[1] What makes the Chinese guide's response so funny is its totally skewed logic, for to criticise the American president in China is no proof of his freedom or courage, or his radical credentials. On the contrary, he is simply doing what he is allowed and encouraged to do by the authorities. To be truly radical, one's critical discourse is supposed to aim at the state power in one's own society, not some foreign power that serves as the whipping boy in the official discourse of political critique. The American may appreciate that the Chinese tour guide shares his idea of oppositional politics, but he may not have realised that the guy is just toeing the official line. In a way, one regrets that a political joke like this can still be relevant to the situation at hand, but that is precisely the point, because this simple joke seems to have captured the core of contention in the recent debate on Chinese postmodernism, in so far as the political implications of postmodern and postcolonialist theories in China are concerned.

In different social and political situations, concepts and terms such as the left and the right may fundamentally change their meaning. In a country that has no political freedom, where state authorities have appropriated leftist rhetoric and have laid claim to revolutionary radicalism, any opposition to their power will be condemned as counter-revolutionary, reactionary and on the right. Not surprisingly, some Russian and East European dissident writers would demand that 'the terms left and right be completely taken out of use, for they contradict the reality of Eastern Europe'[2] I may add that this is also very much the case with the situation in China. In 1957, for example, thousands of Chinese, many of whom were intellectuals who had criticised the state and the ruling Communist Party, were branded as rightists and sent to prisons or labor camps, for to be on the left then meant to side with, rather than oppose, the Party-state. Whether a theory or political stance is radical or conservative, on the left or the right, must thus be determined in concrete circumstances and social conditions.

To understand the significance and political implications of postmodern

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theories in China, therefore, we need first to take a look at the social conditions in the 1990s, which are markedly different from those of the 1980s. The difference is not just temporal but more substantial in terms of cultural and political trends. As a response to the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, the 1980s constitute a period of cultural critique and struggle to liberate the mind from the yoke of outmoded dogmas. After decades of isolation from the rest of the world, Chinese intellectuals played an important role in opening up windows toward the outside world and introducing new ideas and values into the cultural arena of post-Mao China. Seen in modern Chinese history, the cultural critique during the 1980s self-consciously positioned itself in the intellectual lineage of cultural critique of China's past, especially Confucianism as the cultural and political mainstream, which an earlier generation of Chinese intellectuals had started in the May Fourth movement in 1919. The critique of traditional culture in the 1980s, however, took on a special contemporary relevance, implicitly and even explicitly criticising the more recent past of Mao's China, and ultimately tending toward the transformation of China into a modern democratic society. In the 1980s, such a critical tendency clearly ran counter to the interest and agenda of the political establishment and, as a result, officially sponsored ideological campaigns against 'spiritual pollution' and 'bourgeois liberalisation' were launched one after another throughout the 1980s. The confrontation in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 was thus an almost unavoidable outcome of the political tension built up during the whole period, and the destruction of the statue of the 'Goddess of Democracy' could be seen as a highly symbolic and ritual ending of the critical spirit of the May Fourth heritage.

The violent clash in Beijing had profound consequences on social and economic life in China: it in effect put an end to dramatic and violent forms of confrontation. In the 1990s, commercial activities and economic changes dominate the scene, while political action and ideological control retreat into the background. In a way, neo-authoritarianism, which had been briefly but intensely debated among Chinese intellectuals in the late 1980s, became a social practice rather than an academic discussion. That is to say, relaxation in economic policies and the tightening up of ideological control put into practice the core idea of neo-authoritarianism, that China, owing to its special social and economic conditions, cannot afford to have democracy but must strengthen the authority and centralised power of the state in order to move the country into an economically and technologically defined modernity or, in the official discourse of the government, the 'four modernisations' of agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology. To some extent, Singapore may offer a model for this kind of modern and prosperous neo-authoritarian state, and the talk of a Confucian ethic as allegedly contributing to the so-called 'miracle' of East Asian industrialisation serves to reinforce the idea of an East Asian alternative to modernisation. At the same time, open, large-scale defiance and public protests have all but disappeared, and the cry for democracy and political freedom subsided in the wake of the horrible events at Tiananmen. Very quickly, waves of commercialisation and consumerism have engulfed the entire Chinese society; the craze for money and the rise of popular culture seem to have rendered the ideas, values and concerns of the intellectuals irrelevant. Economic

and concomitant social changes have thus brought about new and serious challenges to Chinese intellectuals.

In the Hong Kong journal *Twenty-First Century*, Yu Ying-shih published an influential article in 1991 on the 'marginalisation of Chinese intellectuals', in which he argues that modern history has witnessed the rapid decline of the social status of Chinese intellectuals. Literati-officials have been increasingly marginalised, both politically and culturally, from their central role of *shi* in the traditional political system. Since the beginning of this century when Western ideas, especially Marxism, gradually took over mainland China and made traditional native cultural values insignificant or irrelevant, says Yu, 'Chinese intellectuals have withdrawn themselves toward the very margin of Chinese culture on the one hand, and have constantly paced up and down the margin of Western culture on the other, like a lonely boat lost at sea and unable to reach the shore in either direction.'[3] Yu's argument helped initiate a debate on the role of intellectuals in pre-modern and modern times, but in the specific context of the 1990s, the 'marginalisation of intellectuals' quickly takes on a meaning not intended by Yu Ying-shih in his initial discussion but particularly relevant to the current situation in mainland China. Many scholars began to talk about the 'loss of the humanistic spirit' or the 'decline of elite culture in modern China'. What they mean by this is not the forced retreat of Chinese intellectuals, as Yu conceptualised, from their traditional role of literati-officials and active participation in the political system to their marginalised irrelevance in modern times, but a recent phenomenon in post-Mao China, where intellectuals, as Chen Pingyuan puts it, are turned into 'modern Don Quixotes', who are 'not only punished by political authorities for their deviation from the orthodoxy, but are also abandoned by the market for their "morality', "ideals', and "passion' '.[4] For Chen Pingyuan, the decline of high culture is definitely an urgent current issue, which can be traced to some historical roots, especially to mistakes that intellectuals themselves have made in their worship of 'revolution', and their 'deification of a "plebeian literature' '.[5] That is to say, Chinese intellectuals themselves have, in the last hundred years, advocated a radical populism that has finally materialised with a vengeance and pushed intellectuals and their spiritual values to the margin of social and cultural life in China.

Most scholars lament this marginalisation of intellectuals in a society swept by commercialisation, the rise of consumerism and a lowbrow, valueless popular culture, but some also see it as part of the inevitable concomitant of modernisation and market economy. For example, Zhao Yiheng does not see the marginalisation of intellectuals as a decline, nor does he think the close involvement of Confucian literati-officials in the traditional political system an enviable position, because that involvement made it almost impossible to have any critique of institutional rules and regulations. Marginalisation of intellectuals in China today, he declares, 'is fortunate rather than disastrous, a success rather than failure', because it offers Chinese intellectuals, for the very first time in history, the opportunity to engage in 'pure critique' of the orthodoxy according to their humanistic values and from an outside and independent position.[6] The call to embrace marginalisation is evidently a deliberate overstatement, almost a stylistic indulgence on Zhao's part. Moreover, the independence of intellectuals

in the safe haven of the academy as Zhao describes is more of an ideal situation to be devoutly hoped for than a political reality in China. The idea of cultural critique as the specific responsibility of intellectuals from outside the political system and cultural establishment, rather than from within, however, is an important point. The 'pure critique' is thus ultimately a political critique of the official discourse in culture and politics. Whatever one may think of the marginalisation of intellectuals or the decline of high culture, it is clear that marginalisation is a fact in the China of the 1990s, which provides a cultural and political environment significantly different from that of the 1980s, and it is in this new environment that a whole set of new problems, new theories and new debates have emerged, and it is also in this new environment that we must consider their impact and significance.

Orientalism in the Chinese context

Edward Said's path-breaking book *Orientalism* was first published in 1978 when China had just come out of the nightmare of a 10-year-long self-inflicted torture, known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, in which the official discourse of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, anti-feudalism, anti-capitalism and anti-revisionism, produced and propagated through official news media and the communist party organs, served to justify widespread use of violence to suppress dissent in the country and to legitimise China as the self-appointed centre of world revolution with Mao Zedong as its godlike supreme leader. In this context, Said's book and its anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist argument, though radical and subversive in the context of the Western world, would strike many Chinese readers as imparting a message that seemed in the end surprisingly similar to what they had heard during the Cultural Revolution about the hegemony of the capitalist West and the heroic struggle of two-thirds of the world's population yet to be liberated from such domination. That would probably be a gross misreading of Said, but if the 'text' of Said's book is to have any bearing on the Chinese 'world', as Said himself would have argued in a manner suggested by his essay on 'Travelling Theory', the argument of Orientalism would have to assume 'a new position in a new time and place'.[7] Not surprisingly, with the regime's eagerness to open up the Chinese market to global capital and with the intellectuals' thirst for Western knowledge in the 1980s, *Orientalism* was not widely known to Chinese readers.

In a very different cultural environment of the 1990s, however, Said, like many other postmodern and postcolonial theorists and critics, has become quite well known on the Chinese mainland. Both *Orientalism* and the more recent *Culture and Imperialism* have been translated into Chinese, initiating a serious debate not just about Western representations of the Orient but, more importantly, about the relationship between China and the West in the twentieth century and the function of Western theories and critical concepts when they are introduced to Chinese readers and adopted by Chinese critics. Quite in conformity with Said's own convictions, the theoretical debate in China inspired by *Orientalism* is not literary or purely textual, but directly involved with political issues, as indeed all debates in China tend to be. Those who introduce Said's

works to China are often young Chinese scholars educated in American universities, well informed of the latest development in Western literary theory and criticism, and speaking as a 'new generation of critics', different from all earlier generations, above all, from critics of the 1980s. These critics see the entire modern period from the May Fourth new culture movement of 1919 to the June Fourth of 1989 as dominated by a misplaced trust in Western values of freedom and democracy and the efficacy of modernisation, and by the influence of the Western discourse of Orientalism. In opening up discussions of Orientalism and postcolonialism, the new generation of critics tend to take a revisionist view of the cultural critique during the 1980s—dubbed the 'culture fever'. In an article that introduced Said to the Chinese reading public in 1993, the author, a Chinese student studying in the United States, asks rhetorically 'Have we not heard enough of the talk about imperialism, about hegemony?' The answer given in that article is firm and clear: 'No, not enough, indeed.' For China is still, we are told, under 'the shadow of imperialist hegemony', and 'the "culture fever' of the 1980s testified yet once more to the persistence of imperialist hegemonism'.[8] Thus the appropriation of Said's works in the 1990s serves to repudiate the cultural critique in the 1980s, which is seen as reiterating the modernist discourse predicated on such Western concepts and values as freedom, democracy and modernisation itself, and to re-situate a domestic cultural critique on to a map of global confrontation, cast in terms of the binary opposition between the East and the West, Third World victimisation and Western hegemonic imperialism.

But if Said's critique targets Western imperialism and colonialism, especially the discourse of Western scholars in Oriental studies that misrepresent peoples and cultures of the East, discussions of Said's works in China often target domestic cultural productions as a sort of self-colonisation or shameful surrender to Western hegemony. For example, having introduced the basic ideas of *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, a critic writing in the widely read Beijing journal *Dushu* [Reading Monthly] quickly turns his critique to works by Chinese writers and artists and maintains that many artistic works, including films made by Zhang Yimou that have won a number of foreign awards, try to 'offer some unthinkable and improbable objects to make Westerners feel stimulated, intoxicated or sickened, to produce in Western audiences what in aesthetics is called the "sense of the sublime', the feeling of pity and racial superiority in culture'. Autobiographical works that reflect their authors' sufferings in China during the Cultural Revolution, such as Nien Cheng's *Life and Death in Shanghai*, Chang Jung's *Wild Swans* and Wu Ningkun's *A Single Tear*, draw especially sharp criticism from him. 'It would perhaps be too cruel,' the critic intones with sarcasm, 'to blame them for deliberately catering to the taste of Western readers and soliciting pity and money with their wounds and pus-oozing scars. The point I want to make is that the appreciation of these works by the Western reading public has something to do with the mode of Orientalism'.[9] In the same vein, the various cultural theories and discussions in China from the late-nineteenth century up to the 1980s are dismissed as inadequate reactions to the impact of the West, as one form or another of 'Occidentalism', which he defines as 'an impetuous, blind, and irrational attitude

toward Western culture produced by Chinese scholars under the impact of a strong and dominant Western civilisation.[10] As expected, the 'cultural reflections' of the mid to late 1980s receives his most pungent criticism: 'Some people cursed their own ancestors and made them fall upside-down. They scolded the Chinese for their conservatism, xenophobia and selfishness, their muddleheadedness, their being unscientific, illogical, unhygienic and immoral.'[11]

Such a sweeping dismissal of all the ideas and theories that have been proposed in the last hundred years of Chinese history serves to empower those critics as the only ones who can claim to have escaped from Western influence and have been able to counter the hegemony of Western imperialism on behalf of the native Chinese tradition. Polemically characterising the cultural critique of the 1980s as 'cursing ancestors' and 'scolding' the Chinese for their alleged failings, these critics seem to make an emotional plea for preserving the native tradition, the honour of 'ancestors' and the Chinese national pride against a Westernised modernist discourse, the discourse of Orientalism. And yet, such a burst of patriotic sentiment and defence of Chinese culture do not well up from any deep conviction of the intrinsic values of the native heritage, but as the result of contemporary Western education, the assimilation of the latest developments in Western literary and cultural theories, especially the theories of Orientalism, postcolonialism and postmodernism. The critic cited above, Zhang Kuan, a graduate student from mainland China educated in the United States, speaking from the privileged position of someone with intimate knowledge of Western theories, is able to admonish Chinese scholars at home, in a way that reminds one of a schoolmaster lecturing his naive pupils, 'not to hasten to join in the chorus of Orientalism like a swarm of bumblebees'.[12] What appears in his article as vindication of the native Chinese tradition against a hegemonic West turns out to be an ironic affirmation that it is still the West that offers the framework for a critique of Western hegemony and provides correct answers to all the questions in China.

The response to Said's works in mainland China is of course quite diverse, and at the core of many discussions is again the relationship between China and the West, and between native tradition and foreign ideas. One interesting example is a conversation among five scholars in Beijing, published in *Dushu* in January 1994 as a response to articles on Said in earlier issues. Although not speaking as one unified voice, all five interlocutors are obviously concerned more about what Said's theory means or does in China than about the specifics of that theory itself. What they see as dangerous to the current Chinese situation is not so much the threat of Western imperialism as that of a narrow-minded nationalism and the conservatism in the native tradition. Tao Dongfeng identifies the problematic relationship between national characteristics and modernisation as the 'paradoxical anxiety' of Chinese intellectuals since the May Fourth, and believes that 'the condemnation of Orientalism has at least to some extent satisfied the Sinocentric sentiments of some intellectuals and has an intrinsic connection with the cultural conservatism, Eastern culture regenerationism and the trend of anti-Westernisation that have surfaced in the cultural debate in recent years'.[13] Zhang Fa expresses some doubts about seeing West-centredness as a 'conscious conspiracy' by Westerners, and argues that, though modernis-

ation may be a global tendency, each culture will face the question of 'creative transformation' in its march toward modernisation.[14] Wang Yichuan acknowledges that Said's *Orientalism* has played the positive role of 'deconstructing the fictionality of the image of the Orient' in Western colonialist discourse, but also warns against the 'blind self-enclosure in fighting Western-centrism', as a result of a 'reactionary' rather than 'progressive' assimilation of Said's critique of Orientalism.[15] Sun Jin goes even further and states that putting forward the theory of Orientalism in today's China 'will have a much greater reactionary effect than that of progressiveness', and by 'reactionary' he means the tendency 'to move against a modernised civilisation'.[16] Zhang Rongyi, on the other hand, tries to go beyond the East–West opposition and argues that 'cultures located in marginal areas should also have the right to speak'.[17] That is to say, not everything in a non-Western culture or history is to be understood as a reaction to the threat of the West but should be considered in conjunction with the internal dynamics in the indigenous cultural and political conditions. What becomes immediately clear in reading this conversation is that modernisation, understood not just in terms of modern science and technology but above all in terms of political change towards greater freedom and democracy, is for many Chinese scholars a positive goal not to be forsaken, a goal no less important than national self-strengthening. 'Modernisation is the main theme that should take precedence over everything else in China today,' Tao Dongfeng puts it emphatically. 'Any deviation from this main theme will lead to conservatism.'[18] Of course, as a sophisticated and nuanced argument, Said's *Orientalism* can hardly be reduced to the simplistic and monolithic anti-Western propaganda that it is often said to be. The criticism those Chinese scholars put forth in their conversation, however, is directed not so much toward Said as to those who misappropriate his ideas.

The limitations of the theory of Orientalism have of course been recognised by many non-Chinese scholars as well. Lisa Lowe, for example, rejects the 'totalising orientalism as a monolithic, developmental discourse that uniformly constructs the Orient as the Other of the Occident'.[19] Arran Gare also sees Said's work as somewhat inflexible and argues, with special reference to Sinological studies, that the problem with Said's work is 'not that he has identified a close relation between the discourse of Orientalism and imperialism', but 'that in following Foucault he has not allowed for any other possibility'.[20] How to retain the nuance and theoretical sophistication of Said's theory in a world that is often fiercely confrontational and impatient with careful analysis, and, more importantly, how to avoid turning the theory of Orientalism and postcolonialism into some kind of an endorsement of cultural conservatism, political orthodoxy and religious fundamentalism in the East, remains a serious challenge to all scholars and critics, including Said himself, who has always emphasised the political relevance of theory and tried to make theory work and have a real impact on the realities of our times.

Occidentalism official and unofficial

A controversial television series called *He shang*, or *River Elegy*, which was broadcast in the summer of 1988 and viewed by millions of Chinese with

fascination and agitation, may be taken as a salient example of the cultural critique of the 1980s, and its tendentious depiction of both China and the West can help situate the theoretical discussion of Orientalism in the specific context of contemporary Chinese culture and politics. *River Elegy* takes the form of a documentary, but it is more of an essay on Chinese culture and history, brilliantly conceived, passionately argued and clearly articulated through the effective use of music, visual imagery, archive materials and an emotionally engaging and forceful narration. With its six parts thematically organised around the Yellow River, the dragon, the Great Wall, and some other such potent images long considered to be symbols of Chinese culture and the Chinese nation, *River Elegy* mounts a strong critique of the entire Chinese tradition, especially Confucianism, and unabashedly calls for a 'great flood' to wash out 'the dregs of the old civilisation'. Moreover, it further identifies that great flood as 'none other than the industrial civilisation', the open, 'blue-water', maritime civilisation, best represented by the culture, science and the democratic system of the West.[21] By declaring that Chinese civilisation has declined and become decrepit, and by selectively presenting and commenting on certain historical moments and images of the Chinese, screenwriters Su Xiaokang, Wang Luxiang and their collaborators adopted a number of typical nineteenth-century Western notions—from Hegel's Eurocentric philosophy of history to Marx's problematic notion of the Asiatic mode of production—and constructed a grand narrative that tells of the decline and fall of the earth-bound civilisations of the East—the Egyptian, the Babylonian, the Indian, and now the Chinese—while at the same time speaks of the rise and rapid progress of the West. From Alexander the Great to Columbus and to the expansion of European powers after the Industrial Revolution, even the colonialist history of the West is presented in a somewhat positive light as an indication of the force and vitality of an externally oriented civilisation. In many aspects, therefore, *River Elegy* seems to reiterate the discourse of Orientalism, creating the mythological image of an idealised West above the mythological image of a stagnant and decrepit Orient, and it easily lends itself to the charge of 'fulsomely worshipping things foreign', a charge often thrown at Chinese intellectuals or anyone with any indication of an interest in the outside world, especially the West.

The politically radical and subversive meaning of *River Elegy* was well understood in mainland China by both the average people and the conservative ideologues in the establishment, and that may explain why there was such an overwhelmingly enthusiastic response from general audiences on the one hand, and on the other such a vehement condemnation by the hardliners among the higher-ups in the government. A typical example of the latter is the reaction from Wang Zhen, China's vice-president, an army general, and one of the most conservative oldtimers in the top leadership, who angrily denounced *River Elegy* as 'counter-revolutionary'. The debate about *River Elegy* was soon entangled in the internal strife between different factions of the party and was used by both the moderates and the hardliners in the leadership as a means to try out the strength of opponents. The ban of the TV program in November 1988 thus became an indication that the hardliners had got the upper hand in the top leadership; and after the June massacre in Beijing in 1989,

critique of the program intensified. The TV series was officially condemned, and Su Xiaokang had to flee the country. The whole affair proved once again that the debate on *River Elegy*, like so many other incidents in what appeared to be literary, artistic or cultural matters, was closely and dangerously intertwined with political strife and power struggle in China. Therefore, any analysis and criticism of the TV program would miss the crucial point if it failed to take into consideration the complexity of China's internal politics and the way it is played out.

In China, an official discourse of Occidentalism has always depicted the West as evil and enemy, and this anti-Western discourse has often been used to justify the suppression of any political opponents or any perceived deviation from the party line. Given the presence of such an official Occidentalism, *River Elegy*, with its favourable representation of a free and democratic West can certainly be understood, as Xiaomei Chen argues, 'as a powerful anti-official discourse using the Western Other as a metaphor for a political liberation against ideological oppression within a totalitarian society'.[22] Because of the tremendous difference in political conditions, then, what appears to be a mindless repetition in China of the discourse of Orientalism and thus ideologically suspect, when measured by the yardstick in the Western academia these days, is likely to turn out to be something quite different when situated in the cultural and political life of China, serving a totally different purpose and carrying a totally different meaning. To read such anti-official Occidentalism as mimicry of Orientalism is only to misread it. Not only that, but such a misreading will *de facto* endorse the official anti-Western rhetoric of a repressive regime. To judge Chinese works in purely Western theoretical terms, then, would ironically repeat the same colonialist attitude so sharply criticised by Said and many other theorists and critics. Here, as Xiaomei Chen puts it, lies 'the danger of theoretically recolonising the Third World with Western-invented and theoretically motivated languages of "anti-colonialism" '.[23] And that, as we shall see, is not at all an imaginary danger these days, as the various theories of Orientalism, postcolonialism and postmodernism travelled to China and became hot topics in Chinese criticism.

Postmodernism, conservatism and the role of the intellectual

The presence of that danger in Chinese literary and cultural criticism of the 1990s was brought to the fore in a recent debate on postmodernist theories. The scholarly Hong Kong journal, *Twenty-First Century*, carried two articles in February 1995 that commented on the cultural and political implications of the postmodernist trend in recent Chinese criticism, and the publication of these articles touched off a heated debate in the subsequent issues. The debate is just one of many that we can find in Chinese criticism, and there are many articles on postmodernism in other publications in Chinese, but this particular debate is more focused than most others and has involved a number of participants with quite different voices and views. A brief examination of the debate unfolded in the pages of *Twenty-First Century* may thus give us a clear sense of what is at stake in talking about postmodernism and Western theory in the Chinese context.

In an article entitled ' "Postist Learning' and Neo-Conservatism in China', Zhao Yiheng points out the current ludicrous overuse of the prefix *post-* not just in Western criticism, but also in its Chinese following. He puts all the recently introduced Western theories of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism under the rubric of *post*-ism and relates them to the conservative tendency in Chinese criticism of the 1990s. Zhao maintains that cultural critique should be the task of Chinese intellectuals, and that the concern of such a critique is not to set up an opposition between China and the West in order to stir up the nationalist spirit, but to target and criticise 'the institutionalised culture of one's own country (official culture, popular culture, essentialist culture'.[24] In so far as cultural critique is a theoretical discourse, he argues, it is a critique of 'institution, the theorising and rationalising of the cultural status quo'.[25] In the 1990s, however, the spirit of such a cultural critique is lost in the facile and tendentious talk about postmodernism and postcolonialism on the Chinese mainland, which substitutes a China–West opposition for the critique directed at institutionalised culture or the status quo at home. From the standpoint of cultural critique, then, such a tendency is conservative culturally and politically because it compromises with the cultural orthodoxy and political authorities in China and discusses issues of culture and history with a simple 'blame-it-on-the-West' approach. It is characteristic of this neo-conservatism that its relationship with the West is a preposterous and contradictory one, for on the one hand it claims to represent the interest of China as a Third-World country against the hegemony of the West, while on the other it relies heavily on theories *au courant* in the West, those of postmodernism and postcolonialism in particular, and imitates the latest fashion in Western theoretical discourse for conceptualisation and methodology, even for sentence structure and vocabulary or jargon. It is debatable whether the postmodern critique of modernity and the Enlightenment is making changes for the better in the West, but it is quite certain that, in a non-Western context, the self-critique of the Western tradition by Western scholars can easily be used by conservatives in the East as an excuse to maintain the status quo against any change, which they can readily dismiss as 'Westernisation', as copying something even Western scholars themselves have deconstructed and rejected. This tendentious use of Western theory by cultural conservatives in the East makes the role of theory across cultural and national boundaries much more complicated than it might be in its original context, and it poses an important question: whether Western postmodernism that mounts a radical critique of the Western tradition may offer a convenient theoretical excuse for conservative Chinese intellectuals to shirk their responsibility of internal cultural critique and turn to embrace a narrow-minded nationalism.

In a way, Xu Ben's article on 'Third-World criticism', published together with Zhao Yiheng's in the same issue of *Twenty-First Century*, provides an apt answer to that question. 'The core of such Third-World criticism in China,' Xu points out, 'is an emphasis on nativity rather than rebellion against oppression.' Or rather, it speaks only of rebelling against the 'discursive oppression' of the Third World by the First World, as if that were 'the major form of oppression in China today, thereby concealing and avoiding, wittingly or unwittingly, the violence and oppression that do exist in real life in the indigenous society'.[26]

Those Third-World critics talk about recovering 'the memory of the people' from underneath the suppression by the Western First World, but in China, Xu asks, is ' "the memory of the people' suppressed, ignored, and erased mainly by some Western discourse?' More importantly, does the official narrative of Chinese history 'necessarily agree with the memory of the people?'[27] Speaking of memory, those Third-World critics seem to have no remembrance of the domestic violence, political persecution and total economic collapse in Mao's China during the Cultural Revolution, not to mention other ideological campaigns and political movements that had a disastrous effect on the life of millions of Chinese. To speak in the name of the People, and to idolise and deify that abstract notion of the People, while reducing every living person to naught, has always been the strategy of totalitarian rule. Ultimately it comes down to this basic question: How can 'postist learning' and 'Third-World criticism', which have abandoned the intellectual responsibility of cultural critique and even denied the significance of the very existence of intellectuals, in any way contribute to the project of modernisation, especially to the realisation of democracy in China? How can it help advance the rights and interest of each individual Chinese in real life rather than that of the abstract, collective and reified People?

In an article that explores the seldom discussed and little understood relationship between Western postmodernist theory and the radical sixties, especially the influence of Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution among leftist students and intellectuals in Europe and America, Guo Jian offers another perspective for evaluating the significance of Western postmodernist theory in China. As one example of the Chinese influence on Western postmodernist theory, Guo points out that Fredric Jameson's exposition of 'cultural revolution' as a theoretical concept in *The Political Unconscious* bears some obvious resemblance to Mao's views on class struggle in the realm of ideology and on the long-term coexistence of different classes and modes of production in China. Foucault's discussion with some French Maoists on 'popular justice' is another example to show how this major Western thinker, whose ideas underlie much of postmodernist and postcolonialist theories, formulated his own theory in an environment in which the Chinese Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong thought certainly had a significant influence. The line of thought in many postmodernist thinkers and theoreticians can be traced back to the Chinese experience of the 1960s and the way it was imaginatively understood in the West. Thus, Guo Jian argues that the Chinese Cultural Revolution and Mao's theory can be called 'pre-postmodern' because they have influenced and anticipated some of the central ideas and important concepts in contemporary postmodernist theories. We may recall that Liu Kang has also called our attention to the connection of Foucault and Mao, but for him that connection is supposed to validate Maoism by the enormous authority Foucault enjoys in Western theoretical discourse.[28] For Guo Jian, however, history and reality in China are more important than paying homage to the authority of Western theoreticians. To see the connection between Foucault and Mao, or Western leftist theories and Maoism, says Guo, 'will help us question the value and significance of Western "postist learning' in the cultural criticism in contemporary China.[29] The influence of Maoism and Cultural

Revolution on radical postmodernist theories still needs to be carefully studied, but given the experience of calamities during the Cultural Revolution, the reception of such theories in China cannot be a simple transference and assimilation, and debate on Western theories will always be part of a larger debate on Chinese culture, history, tradition and modernity.[30]

Although there have been a number of responses to the initial articles by Zhao and Xu, quite a few scholars have supported their main argument concerning the conservative tendency in discussions of Chinese culture and history in the 1990s. In an article published in 1994, for example, Wang Hui argues that cultural conservatism in China manifests itself today in two forms, 'one of which is a re-examination of radicalism in modern time, and the other mixes up the preservation of traditional culture with the upholding of the interest of the nation and state. This is not radical in either cultural or political terms, but works to reinforce the mainstream, and thus it is completely opposite to the significance of the same type of theories in the United States.'[31] Perhaps to claim that neo-conservatism has become the main trend in current Chinese criticism, as Zhao Yiheng argued in his article, may have overstated the case, but the conservative nature of the Chinese appropriation of Western postmodern theories is rather evident. Having read some of the Chinese spokesmen of postmodern theories, even Jonathan Arac feels that such Chinese post-ism sounds 'more like a voice of the establishment'.[32] The abandonment of a critical and oppositional stance toward cultural orthodoxy and political establishment in much of what has been written in the name of postmodernist, postcolonialist or Third-World criticism in mainland China does indeed present a serious problem for the continuation of cultural critique and the role of intellectuals.

Chinese 'postism' has in effect relinquished the critical role of intellectuals and contributed to their marginalisation, and that can be seen clearly in some of the responses to Zhao and Xu from those 'postist' scholars. In his retort to Zhao and Xu, Zhang Yiwu, who is one of the most active and articulate 'postist' or 'Third-World' critics in mainland China, does not so much refute their argument as confirm it by reiterating precisely the line of talk that they have found problematic and inherently conservative. Quite predictably, Zhang Yiwu dismisses any critique of Chinese 'postism' or 'Third-World criticism' as yet another exercise of 'Western' victimisation of China, as if 'postist' critics were alone invested with some kind of Chinese authenticity and thus capable of truly representing the interest of China and the Chinese People. The talk of victimisation and hegemonic suppression, of course, turns out to be an old strategy of empowerment, for once a Third-World critic identifies himself with China, anyone criticising him would be accused of being anti-Chinese, of evoking 'Western cultural hegemony' to suppress the voice of an innocent Third-World country, even though that voice of the so-called Third-World critic sounds like an echo of contemporary Western theories of Orientalism, postcolonialism and postmodernism. Zhang Yiwu declares that those Chinese critics who do their theorising from the perspectives of postcolonialism and Third-World criticism 'have completely changed the unconditional "subordinate' position to Western discourse and the senseless infatuation with "modernity', which one finds in Chinese intellectuals of the 1980s who indulged in the discourse of

"Enlightenment.' '[33] The irony is, however, that at the precise moment when these Chinese postmodern and postcolonial critics claim to have escaped the shadow of Western discourse, they are sinking deeper than anyone else into 'the unconditional "subordinate' position to Western discourse' and 'the senseless infatuation with "postmodernity' '. As Guo Jian observes, 'what Zhang Yiwu calls the viewpoint of the "Third World' is nothing but the viewpoint defined by "First-World' "postist' theoreticians who claim to speak for the "Third World' '.[34] In a sense, Chinese 'postism' is a discourse that does not have its own voice embedded in the reality of Chinese social and political life, but echoes the Western theoretical discourse of postmodernism and postcolonialism and, even worse, the official discourse of the cultural and political establishment at home. It is this political situation that one must take into consideration in examining the significance of Western theories of Orientalism, postcolonialism and postmodernism in the Chinese context.

Notes

1 This political joke was circulated among some Chinese after the Cultural Revolution in the early 1980s. It is perhaps a modified version of a similar political joke in the former Soviet Union.

2 Thomas Lahusen with Gene Kuperman (ed), *Late Soviet Culture: From Perestroika to Novostroika* Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, p 21

3 Yu Ying-shih, 'The marginalisation of Chinese intellectuals' [Zhongguo zhishifenzi de bianyuanhua], *Ershi yi shiji* [Twenty-First Century], 6, Aug. 1991, p 25.

4 Chen Pingyuan, 'The decline of elite culture in modern China' [Jin bainian Zhongguo jingying wenhua de shiluo], *Ershi yi shiji*, 17, June 1993, p 12.

5 Chen Pingyuan, 'Decline of Elite Culture', p 18.

6 Zhao Yiheng, 'Toward the Margin' [Zouxiang bianyuan], *Dushu* [Reading Monthly], 1, Jan. 1994, pp 40, 41.

7 Edward Said, 'Travelling Theory', in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1983, p 227.

8 Qian Jun, 'Said on culture' [Tan Sayide tan wenhua], *Dushu*, 9, Sept. 1993, p 14.

9 Zhang Kuan, 'The "Other' in the eyes of the Europeans and the Americans: from orientalism to occidentalism' [Ou Mei ren yan zhong de 'feiwo zulei': cong 'Dongfang zhuyi' dao 'Xifang zhuyi'], *Dushu*, 9, Sept. 1993, p 7.

10 Zhang Kuan, 'From orientalism to occidentalism', p 8.

11 Zhang Kuan, 'From orientalism to occidentalism', p 8.

12 Zhang Kuan, 'From orientalism to occidentalism', p 9.

13 Wang Yichuan, Zhang Fa, Tao Dongfeng, Zhang Rongyi and Sun Jin, 'Margin–center–east–west' [Bianyuan, zhongxin, Dongfang, Xifang], *Dushu*, 1, Jan. 1994, p 146.

14 Wang Yichuan *et al.*, 'Margin–center–east–west', p 147.

15 Wang Yichuan *et al.*, 'Margin–center–east–west', p 149.

16 Wang Yichuan *et al.*, 'Margin–center–east–west', p 150.

17 Wang Yichuan *et al.*, 'Margin–center–east–west', p 151.

18 Wang Yichuan *et al.*, 'Margin–center–east–west', p 150–51.

19 Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, p 4.

20 Arran E. Gare, 'Understanding oriental cultures', *Philosophy East and West*, 45, July 1995, p 323.

21 See Su Xiaokang, Wang Luxiang *et al.*, *He shang* [River Elegy], in *He sang lun* [On *River Elegy*], Cui Wenhua (ed), Beijing, Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1988 pp 1–80. For a complete English translation of the script and related essays, see the three-issue series of *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* under the general title of *The Chinese Television Documentary 'River Elegy'* of which Part I (Winter 1991–92) contains an English translation of River Elegy, Part II (Summer 1992) and Part III (Fall 1992) contain essays, commentaries and review articles that offer a variety of views in the subsequent discussion and debate on the television series. Here I quote from the English translation in Part I, 18, 79.

[22] Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1995, p 8.

[23] Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism*, p 17.

[24] Zhao Yiheng, ' "Postist Learning' and Neo-Conservatism in China' ['Houxue' yu Zhongguo xin baoshou zhuyi], *Ershi yi shiji*, 27, Feb. 1995, p 14.

[25] Zhao Yiheng, 'Cultural critique and postmodernist theory' [Wenhua pipan yu houxiangdai zhuyi lilun], *Ershi yi shiji*, 31, Oct. 1995, p 150.

[26] Xu Ben, 'The condition of "Third-World criticism' in contemporary China' ['Disan shijie piping' zai dangjin Zhongguo de chujing], *Ershi yi shiji*, 31, Oct. 1995, p 17.

[27] Xu Ben, 'Third-World criticism', p 21–22.

[28] Liu Kang, 'Politics, critical paradigms: reflections on modern Chinese literature studies', *Modern China*, 19, Jan. 1993, p 13–40.

[29] Guo Jian, 'The ideological trend of cultural revolution and "Postist Learning' ' [Wenge sichao yu 'houxue' '], *Ershi yi shiji*, 35, June 1996, p 116.

[30] For a recent study that makes some comments on the relationship of French theory and Maoism, see Peter Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory After may '68*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.

[31] Wang Hui and Zhang Tianwei, 'Theories of cultural critique and the problem of nationalism in contemporary' [China Wenhua pipan lilun yu dangdai Zhongguo minzu zhuyi wenti], *Zhanlue yu guanli* [Strategy and Management] 4, 1994, p 18.

[32] Jonathan Arac, 'Chinese postmodernism: toward a global context,' *boundary 2*, 24, Fall 1997, p 269.

[33] Zhang Yiwu, 'The anxiety of interpreting "China' ' [Chanshi 'Zhongguo' de jiaolü] *Ershi yi shiji* 28, April 1995, p 132.

[34] Guo Jian, 'Cultural revolution and "Postist Learning' ', p 118.